

SOWING THE SEEDS OF PEACE IN SCHOOL: AN ANTIDOTE FOR A VIOLENT WORLD?

Prologue

The unspeakable horror of violence in schools... children killing children. The human mind gasps in its wake, unable to comprehend such utter tragedy and inexplicable loss. Most of humankind panics when our children are at risk. As mammals, we are programmed to protect and nurture our offspring at all costs. Our brains shut down, logic fails and we are chilled with the realization that we **cannot** look our children in the eye and promise... never again will bullets come to school.

There are no silver linings to be found in this dark cloud and we must not deny the waves of fear which continue to sweep over us long after the storm is over. Yet sometimes, teardrops may be pierced by even a tiny sunbeam and a soft glow of color will fill the sky. Even though a rainbow shimmers only briefly; its beauty, hope and promises are real. Children **can** learn to live together in emotional, social and physical safety. However, they **cannot** be expected to master the necessary skills through mere exposure to adult knowledge and concerns; they must be deliberately taught with courage, care and commitment. When we follow the rainbow to where it begins, we find the key to safety in schools, waiting for us at its end. However, unlike the proverbial pot of gold, which can be claimed and carried off by just a strong few... the *Rainbow of Safety* will yield its treasure only to **each... and all, equally**.

Introduction

To many adult minds, the image of school as a frightening place is as surprising as it is disturbing. However, to untold numbers of children across the globe, the expectation of some regular form of violence in school holds absolutely **no** surprise! Though most of their stories remain untold, the **invisible** violence of social aggression is woven as predictably into some children's lives as the ringing of the school bell. Worse still, where most responsible schools respond promptly to bloody noses and split lips, children who suffer from a bully's subtle attacks usually suffer alone.

How can it be that otherwise competent and caring educational communities are failing to protect children from chronic persecution from their peers? With violence

prevention research indicating that persistent bullying is the **only** common denominator shared by victims turned shooters, how have schools missed this message? The media implies that the missing piece of the puzzle is elusive and impossible to acquire. Over and over they ask: „*What can we DO to stop violence in schools?*“. Perhaps the answer eludes them because they are asking the wrong question! There is nothing that can be **done** to the educational community to eliminate violence. Security screening of backpacks, video cameras and the presence of uniformed officers in schools are merely desperate measures which rely on luck and random sampling.

In reality, the missing ingredient is no mystery and flows naturally from the core of what it means to be human. It is embodied in the philosophy of HURT-FREE SCHOOLS and the *Rainbow of Safety*, a school-wide model based on the principles of human need fulfillment, emotional learning, trauma recovery and violence prevention. Used successfully in schools throughout the United States and South Africa, the *Rainbow of Safety* establishes the foundation for learning to live well together: skills for balancing **every** person's non-negotiable right to feel safe in school.

For young children, learning to live in mutual acceptance and respect means learning the **language of peace**. The **right** questions become: „Where do we find this language? How can educational communities use such a language to insure the emotional, social and physical safety of **every** child?“.

♣ **Violence in schools will not stop when the goal is simply to halt it.**

Violence stops... when children start living together in peace.

Clearing the air: identifying roadblocks in the development of a language of peace for children

The first step in creating a language of peace for children is to challenge commonly-held assumptions which block efforts towards the creation of safe school climates. Left unaddressed, these unresolved issues drain energy from members of the educational community who continue to ask: „Yes, that sounds true, **but...** ?“.

I. The world is a violent place. The educational community cannot possibly compete with the powerful negative messages which continually bombard youth

Always it seems, somewhere on the face of the earth, the dark cloud of violence is blowing. Children throughout time have been forced to find a way to learn, work and play under its sinister shadows. While faces, politics, languages and borders change; the challenges for children growing up amidst troubled times remain constant. Threats of imminent danger intrude upon the child's world, muting the vibrant colors of youth. Schools who desire safe environments for their students will be competing against formidable opponents for the moral souls of youth. What educator in the world feels prepared to take on the savage violence of toxic crime or the scars of rage left after generations of brutality and injustice? When even global efforts seem to falling short in the face of crushing poverty, unemployment and the unrelenting swell of children or-

phaned from AIDS... what rational person could blame educators for throwing up their hands in utter defeat? When children watch their parents' office buildings tumble to the earth to become dust, when violence fills the radio waves and movie screens... the justifications for feeling hopeless are endless!

It is true, few educational communities can claim influence over **outside** factors which determine whether or not children grow up in peace or war but **all** can make a direct impact on factors found **inside** their schools. Too many children arrive at school everyday with hearts knotted in dread. They know that today, just like every other, they will be stalked by a kind of violence which originates from **within** the school's walls... the **school bully**. Educators are missing the mark and forfeiting valuable opportunities to oppose violence among youth when they fail to recognize what can and must be done to create havens of safety within their own walls.

To illustrate the educational community's potential for impacting children's levels of safety in school, here is an example from an elementary school in the United States. In a school with 600 children, there are 7 hours in each school day and 180 days in the school year. Many children remain in this school for the entire 8 years (kindergarten, readiness, grades 1-6) of their primary school experience:

7 hours × 180 days × 600 children × 8 years = 6 048 000 contact hours with children.

Over 6 million windows of opportunity to positively influence children's hearts and souls is *not* an insignificant number! Surely, it makes sense for schools to make **every** minute count in teaching children the positive problem-solving skills necessary to counterbalance the forces of violence on the street!

♣ **Rather than worrying about what they cannot do, educational communities must use their energies to focus on what they *can* do... and *do it well!***

To do nothing is to abandon children to the random forces of violence.

II. **Bullying has been around for centuries. Why I remember bullies on the playground when I was a kid... why are we making such a big deal of it today?**

Bullying is just a normal part of growing up, isn't it?

My child needs to toughen up.

Bullying will teach him to stand up for himself.

Teasing and calling names... it's just the way kids are, she shouldn't be so sensitive!

I tell my child just to walk away and go play somewhere else.

The detached tone of these adult observations stands in the starkest of contrasts to the emotional distress displayed by young victims of bullying. When face-to-face with a sobbing, trembling or worse, stone-silent, child who is being brutalized by a bully... most reasonable adults would see the irrelevance of such an impersonal point of view. Young children who are bullied on a regular basis exhibit pain which is visible, deep and all encompassing. Long-term effects include significant disruptions in sleep, appetite, physical health, concentration and mood. Often the first sign of a bullying problem appears when previously happy and well-adjusted students suddenly experience the

onset of learning difficulties, aversions to the playground or bus or an outright refusal to come to school. Research studying the impact of chronic trauma on children reports long lasting effects for both victim **and** bully. 50% of children who are bullied are more likely to suffer from anxiety and depression as adults. Children who bully at a young age are 6 times more likely to have criminal records by the age of 30.

♣ **When adults fail to recognize the psychological trauma associated with bullying, they are, by default, condoning a toxic school climate which threatens all children's safety and well-being. Worse, by failing to offer advocacy and protection, they are abandoning vulnerable children when they are most in need of help.**

III. Even the most caring and competent educational communities must examine their attitudes towards bullying and school climate. Questions never asked... will most likely... never be answered

Bullies build their success upon a set of adults' attitudes which do not challenge their behaviors. Educational communities have been slow to recognize their own roles and responsibilities for addressing questions surrounding bullying. For example, why are adults surprised at the image of danger in schools when **any** child can report damaging emotional, social or physical injuries to self or others... at the end of almost any recess? Even when research has clearly linked bullying to the seeds of school violence, why do 71% of high school students still report that adults do nothing to stop bullying? Why aren't children who are experiencing acute emotional distress from bullies... asking for help? How have competent and well-intentioned educators failed to protect children from peer abuse? Who decided that children's emotions are so different from adults and that a child could never be driven to seeking his or her revenge with a weapon?

♣ **Unlike adults, who are protected with laws regarding assault, stalking, slander, extortion, theft and sexual harassment ...children are often left standing alone, in silence. Worse, adult attitudes may send the toxic message that there is something *wrong* with a sensitive child who is unable to shake off or ignore a bully's attacks.**

IV. When children leave school, they are exposed to violence in their homes and neighborhoods. Many see their violent aggression as a necessary skill for their own survival

Fear, danger, pain, power and weapons are words that continue to creep insidiously into the psyche of today's educational communities. These words are the universal building blocks which form the human experience surrounding violence, dominance and intimidation. They apply to **all** threats from nuclear warheads, gang leaders, abusive parents to the tiny clenched fist of the youngest bully on the playground. Bullying creates the foothold for violence in the heart of a child by distorting the paths to healthy growth and development. Bullying among peers negates mutual acceptance and

respect. It creates predators, victims, dominance, intimidation and terror. Bullying holds spectators as horrified hostages. It fuels the fears which keeps victims and bystanders from seeking help. Embers of guilt and helpless frustration smolder and glow until they ignite into sparks of rage. Bullying sows the seeds of violence in schools and creates wounds that often continue to fester and grow into adulthood.

The likely outcome for children who are surrounded by violence is known. Some will survive if they are lucky to be blessed with some small flame of hope somewhere in their lives. Schools who teach skills for peaceful living offer youth alternatives to violence. They create resilience and choice, where before there was none. If children are to become the global citizens who will search for tomorrow's peace, they must be supported in learning non-violent problem-solving which can lead them to the positive fulfillment of their basic human needs. Shouldn't educational communities be doing all that they can to combat violence by planting the seeds of peace in children's souls? When fear and pain become today's victors; tomorrow's rights, freedoms and self-expression are in danger of being forever lost. Building a universal language of peace supports the rights and safety of **every** child and provides a common foundation upon which children can learn to live together in peace.

♣ **Educational communities must create deliberate environments where the language of peace is taught, nurtured and upheld with clear expectations for children's behavior: „We will not use bullying... or any other form of violence to communicate with one another in our school ...not here, not now, not in this place”.**

V. Our school has students from pre-school to adolescence who differ from one another in every possible way. How can one language reach each of them... and all of them?

It is true that children come from widely diverse backgrounds, bringing their luggage (positive as well as negative) with them. In a typical school population, lessons from home may range from careful, responsible parenting to the ravages of utter neglect. While some homes use respectful, solution-oriented communication to solve disagreements, others resort to cruel verbal tirades and physical abuse. Socialization for one child may mean playing age-appropriate board games with patient, instructive adults while another child's primary source of interaction comes from endless hours of unsupervised video-game play... or wandering the streets, alone. Particularly challenging are individual children's differences in the genetic predisposition for self-control. When faced with an identical social challenge, one child approaches with quiet competence while another thrashes about helplessly in a sea of her or his own inexplicable impulses.

Educational communities, like the wider world, are peopled with human beings with mixed histories, beliefs and abilities. When the challenges of diversity are viewed through the eyes of a common language, educators realize that they have been presented with a unique opportunity. While a school resembles a microcosm of greater society in many ways, there is one major difference. Rather than accept the random (or worse) friction between people of different means or backgrounds, all children can be supported and held equally accountable to a universal standard of safety and peace.

The sources for a common language of peace are not magical. They do not come from any one part of the world, religion or political belief but from the time-tested realities behind human need fulfillment, emotional learning and social climate. In a bizarre sense, violence prevention research validates the absolute necessity for understanding the meaning of these principles in healthy human interaction. No ethical researcher would consider testing any child's outer limit to endure shame, fear and ridicule. No sane person would dare to set up artificial experimental conditions to study a child's frantic scratching for any means of survival and escape from trauma and abuse. Yet, when children are hurt every day, when they are exposed to violence, when they are filled with fury and hopelessness and have access to weapons... the optimal conditions for such an incomprehensible experiment are indeed, in place. Tragically, a predictable outcome was, indeed, proven when violence came to school in a backpack.

♣ **When a language of peace is based at its very core, on what makes us most human... the basic and universal needs of children are not only met but surpassed, freeing *all* children to reach towards their full potential.**

VI. How does the educational community determine the foundation for a language of peace? How can the community insure that members' traditions and beliefs are honored equally?

These are essential questions which must be asked and answered with great deliberation so that the entire community may embrace this new language. The answer may be surprising in its simplicity. The basic ingredients must be gathered from **all** sources which hold universal meaning to its members. Originally, the elements of the HURT-FREE SCHOOL'S *Rainbow of Safety* language came, literally, from the United States Constitution, Bill of Rights, United States Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, New Hampshire Pupil Safety and Violence Prevention laws, United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child and local school district policy.

In South Africa, the *Hurt-Free* model absorbed ingredients to its mix to insure relevance to its many cultures including the: the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, the basic tenets of NEPAD (New Economic Plan for African Development), abstracts from Nelson Mandela's *The Long Walk to Freedom* and the beautiful African word which describes the essence of individuals living well within a community... *ubuntu!*

A perusal of the Polish Constitution adopted by the National Assembly on 2 April 1997 re-confirms the validity of the basic tenets and recipe for a language of peace. The same universal ingredients are found in good measure in these words and phrases: truth, justice, good equal(ity) in rights and obligations towards the common, bound in community, respect, freedom, cooperation, inherent, inalienable dignity, protection... and defense of children against violence, cruelty and exploitation.

♣ **The recipe for a language of peace remains intact only when it welcomes ingredients from *all* facets of the educational community. It must honor, at all times, its most important instruction: add ingredients one by one in equal measure,**

stirring carefully to avoid burning... boil the differences until each blends fully with the others!

VII. When carefully constructed and maintained, even young children are capable of assuming responsibility for the quality of their school's climate

The challenges in carefully creating and deliberately maintaining a positive school environment which offers both social education and strategies to address, prevent bullying are real. Yet, even very young children can be taught to recognize the impact of purposeful behavior (both individual and collective) on the quality of their lives in school. While many children experiment with aggression, it is often a default behavior brought on by frustration, fatigue, confusion, a lost temper or a simple mistake. Deliberate behaviors which seem to be seeking belonging or power are often attractive for awhile, especially when children are imitating their peers. These pre-bully behaviors are often abandoned by basically well-adjusted children when they experience negative feedback or social consequences from their peers. Most children are truly horrified when they discover that their hurtful behaviors caused another person considerable distress. A true bully, however, targets their victims' greatest vulnerabilities, hurts them repeatedly and deliberately and will follow them to the far ends of the playground to continue to torture them. Bullies do not stop when they are asked and often enjoy their victim's pain and distress. Children are capable of understanding the difference between a poor choice of behaviors and intentional, persistent harm when they have clear expectations, frequent reminders and opportunities to practice new skills.

- ♣ **Once created, the deliberate prosocial climate begins to weave its magic spell.**
- Bullying is no longer an option.**
- Indifference is challenged: replaced by knowledge and choice.**
- Timidity in doing right is erased, endorsed by the enthusiastic support of all.**
- Children who naturally possess moral competence blossom into leaders who inspire and encourage their peers.**

The creation and maintenance of positive school climate

- ♣ **A HURT-FREE School is defined...**
- not as the absence of pain but, rather, as the positive presence**
- of an informed and deliberate community which is highly committed**
- to the emotional, social and physical safety of every child.**

10 Elements of a Hurt-free School

Secure and peaceful school environments can be created and maintained when they rely on the following strategies:

1. UNIVERSALLY APPLIED and school-wide in scope. The protection of the *Rainbow of Safety* stretches over every member of the school community. No one is left out. Bullies rely on low structure settings during the school day when adults are

less likely to notice their behaviors. Turning a corner in a hallway, ducking behind a book shelf or blending smoothly into a crowd are skills which bullies perfect in order to remain invisible to adults. For this reason, a HURT-FREE SCHOOL calls on every member of the school community to assume ownership and responsibility for a safe environment. „When everyone’s eyes are open, bullies have nowhere to hide!”

2. INFORMED, based on studies in child development, human needs/response to trauma, bullying, social climate, violence prevention, law etc. Children can apply the principles of complex social research when presented in a way that is developmentally appropriate. The *Rainbow of Safety* uses familiar everyday images to prompt children’s awareness of their behavior choices.

3. DELIBERATE, viewed as a high priority within the school day requiring vigilance and commitment. The creation and maintenance of a safe school environment are not left up to chance but are planned for and implemented on a daily basis to help children learn and practice their new social skills. HURT-FREE SCHOOL’S character education program, Teacher-Friendly Character Education: A Monthly Model for Classroom/School-wide Learning provides multiple messages for each day in the form of Words to Grow By, a Thought for Today, Behavior Challenge, Vocabulary Words, bulletin boards, posters and Suggestions for Discussion/Journal Writing.

4. VISIBLE because young children benefit from consistent reminders which support them in applying knowledge to daily behaviors. They are also reassured by the constant everyday presence of safety strategies which they know can help them should they feel threatened in any way.

5. ACCOUNTABLE promises of safety must be upheld in a way which is reliable and easily monitored. HURT-FREE SCHOOLS Helpful/Hurtful Policy represents a series of contracts between students which guides the exploration of hurtful behaviors. The stigma of being for „bad kids only” is removed when the entire community openly embraces and endorses these interventions. Children are fully aware of what will happen when they repeatedly chose to hurt another child on purpose. Social education evolves into facing consequences when a bully continues to hurt... after they have been asked to stop.

6. RESPONSIVE means that, once promised, strategies must be effectively delivered so that children can have confidence that their safety will be protected. The Helpful/Hurtful Policy provides a paper trail of interventions for children, educators and parents to monitor developing patterns of negative behaviors.

7. CHILD-FRIENDLY language is essential for more than the obvious reasons. Children can master complex lessons from social theory when presented in a developmentally appropriate manner. There are REAL reasons why children should care about the degree of safety in their schools. When adults assume that current research is irrelevant or incomprehensible to children, a powerful tool for encouraging their ownership and commitment is lost. Policies and procedures which are reserved for adults only are likely to merely gather dust on a shelf.

8. PROVIDE HANDS-ON SKILLS which children can use on their own to solve real, everyday issues in their lives. Children are naturally motivated to address their own problems when they do not have to rely on their under-developed abilities to generalize. Children’s own real-life dilemmas provide the most compelling content for learning new behaviors.

9. PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES for students to observe, practice, receive feedback while learning new behavior skills. Learning is enhanced when children can apply their lessons cognitively, emotionally and physically. Practical application increases motivation and retention while providing more time for quality academic instruction.

10. TEACHER-FRIENDLY, all elements recognize and honor educators' many and varied responsibilities by offering tools which increase efficiency in dealing with learner's behavior while fitting seamlessly into daily classroom routines. Teachers are motivated to participate in efforts which result in improved behaviors in the classroom. When a child experiences the consist support and feedback from a HURT-FREE SCHOOL model throughout their school careers, teachers discover that they spend less time in the beginning of every school year in establishing classroom routines. Children benefit from the familiar and consistent language and strategies which **follow them** throughout their school years.

Teaching tools

The following are examples of tools that are used in HURT-FREE SCHOOL'S Language of Peace for Children:

Rainbow Rights in a Language of Peace for Children

The Rainbow of Safety STRETCHES over EVERYONE

ABC's of Peace

Conclusion

For hundreds of years, bullying or peer abuse has flourished in educational communities worldwide, robbing children of their rights to feel safe in school. Perhaps, most cruel of all, caring members of their school community... educators, parents and other children... do nothing. There is no collective response to their terror, no sense of outrage or outpouring of support, there is only the deafening sound of silence.

The tragedies of school shootings, however, have begun to tear the blinders from the eyes of educators around the world. The tendencies to minimize, deny, rationalize or refuse to take the time to fully address social or emotional issues... will no longer be options. The choice of not knowing what to do, not doing enough or doing nothing at all to address bullying in school... no longer exist. The belief that words are not enough to break children's hearts and shatter their futures... is at last, being challenged. Violence in response to aggression, dominance and the inability to tolerate diversity exacts a heavy toll on the quality of the human experience... at any age. When fear is the victor in a child's heart, the ongoing development of humankind's freedoms and rights may be forever diminished.